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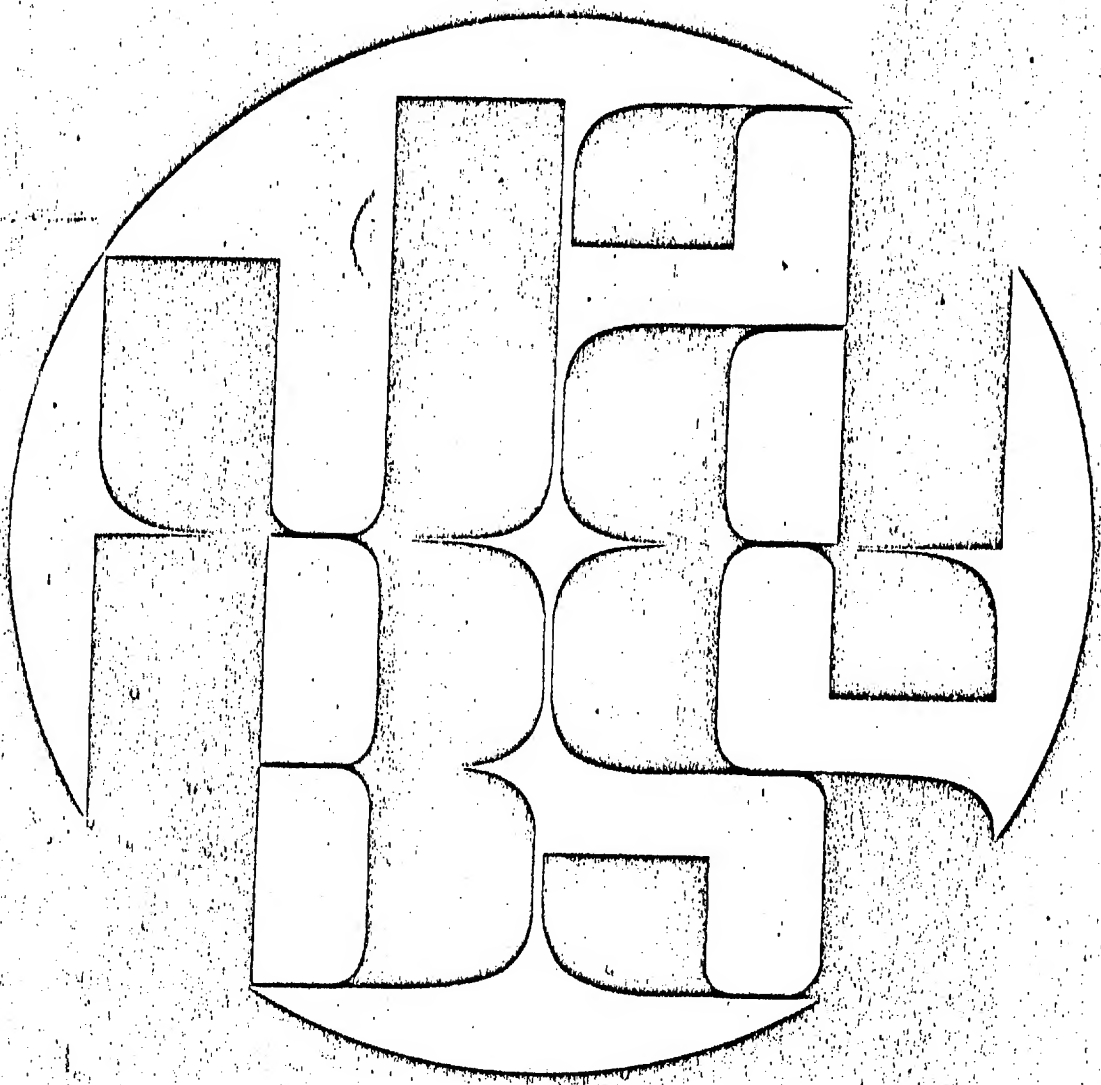

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Team Building—One Approach to Organizational Development

WILLIAM J. CROCKETT

The following article is a description of the first team-building meeting (between boss and subordinates) ever held in the Department of State and perhaps in any organization of the federal government throughout the United States.

The article describes the serious doubts that were in the mind of the leader at the start of the meeting, how the premeeting interviews were conducted, and how the interview data were handled. The inhibitions felt by boss and subordinates upon leveling in front of one another are revealed, and the methods used by the consultants in enabling the group to confront the data and work them through are fully described.

As the author shares his own fears and experiences, one can see how a team is created by the individual members in working through the data which they themselves have had available all the time.

After a description of the back-home results of these efforts there is the conclusion that it is indeed a worthwhile experience for a workgroup.

THE TEAM MEETS

They could have been any business or professional group, these ten men around the luncheon table. There was the usual banter and kidding; the good-natured poking of fun and the quick retort. There was the obvious story and the laughter of men at ease with one another. I tried to detect signs of strain among them but saw none, except for my own nervousness. For this group of ten were *my* men, men whom I had picked—men with whom I had worked and achieved. They were all good men. Some had worked for me as long as six

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years, from the time that I was first appointed by President Kennedy to be Assistant Secretary of State for Administration early in 1961. In fact, some of the relationships went beyond that, back to the time when I was one of them, a fellow employee in the Department of State.

Now five years later I, the Boss, and my ten key subordinates were having lunch together before starting a series of meetings which were called "Organizational Development." The meetings would run for a day and a half or two days. During this time we would explore our feelings and our problems of working together. In addition to the eleven of us, there were also Charles Ferguson of U.C.L.A. and Charles Seashore of the NTL Institute for Applied Behavioral Science, Washington, D.C. Dr. Ferguson and Dr. Seashore would meet with us and help us with the problems we would encounter.

As the luncheon drew to an end and the time for work approached, I found myself questioning the whole activity.

Could there, I wondered, be any real problems beneath the surface of our relationships that would be worth two days of our busy time away from the State Department? After all, were these men not all well adjusted, well acquainted, and quite at ease with one another? This seemed obvious from the way they had enjoyed their luncheon together. Would this kind of confrontation fracture the well-being of this group? I wondered. Would we ever have this kind of friendly, jovial, easy feeling again if we went ahead with this "team-building" excercise? And yet, I knew that there were some personal animosities among us that surfaced occasionally and, when they did, made us all uncomfortable and edgy until they were again safely tucked away from sight. Could we, I wondered, deliberately surface these feelings and then be able to handle them as a group?

HOW MUCH RISK?

I was also concerned about the other risks that a meeting like this might hold. These men were good. I needed them all. I could ill afford to lose any of them, for they did work together as well as any group with which I had ever been associated. And if, as a result of this meeting, some persons were to leave me, the price would have been too great!

I questioned also whether or not it were proper to expose

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the group's problems in front of two outsiders. Would these two men be trusted enough by the group for us to talk frankly and openly about our problems in front of them? Was it not true that we should not wash our dirty linen in public? Should we not try to work our problems through together without these outside consultants?

In anticipating what was to follow, I was troubled with the thought that I would be called upon to share my feelings about each of these fellows in front of the others, and later on, we would expose each of these persons before his peers. I had been taught as a manager that the boss does not discuss a man's performance, capabilities, and weaknesses in front of his peers. It just is not done. Now I suddenly realized that I would surely be called upon to do just that before the day was finished. Another strain to cause the group to fracture? Perhaps. Even more distressing to me was the thought of the honest, face-to-face evaluation which I would be expected to give on each of them. That kind of open confrontation would be the most difficult problem I personally had to face.

I also wondered about the validity of our concept of forming an Executive Group. Could I share my responsibilities and my authority with them in a group situation? We had recently reorganized my area of responsibility by eliminating, in some cases, as many as five layers of hierarchy between me and the basic program managers (personnel, budget, building, finance, accounting, audit, and so on). We must now find a means of strengthening my office, stretching it laterally rather than deepening it vertically, to enable me to cope with the many new demands that these 30 or 40 new managers, who now reported directly to me, would make upon my time. How could we organize an Executive Group that would somehow be an extension—an elongation—of "me," so that these new managers would not feel that we had freed them of an old and established bureaucracy on the one hand only to put them into a new and strange hierarchical structure on the other?[1] Could we talk openly and honestly about the issues involved? Of course, there would be opposition and hurt and doubt and

1. Part of the State Department's reorganization called "Management by Programs and Objectives" (MOP).

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questions posed for everyone. Could we really work this through at such a meeting, or would it not be easier, simpler, and better for me just to direct things to be done? After all, I did have the authority. I might even be able to "manipulate" the organization into being as I had so often done in the past when I had wanted to accomplish something difficult. Why waste all this time on such an issue when I already knew the answer I wanted?

COULD WE REALLY LEVEL?

I wondered whether we would have the nerve—the guts—to confront one another with the personal problems (feelings) that were bothering us. Or would we slip off the issues and try to cover up the difficulties as we had so often done in the past? This group had been meeting together for years in a staff capacity. Our practice was to go around the table each morning, talk about the problems of the day, and discuss the issues. Some of those ten would always be silent. Some would have ideas on almost any subject. Some would talk superficially about the problems which were in another's area of responsibility. But in the end, all would give way to me, the boss, to make the final decision and determine what to do. They did not act as a group, nor were they much interested as a group in the total problems I faced. Each problem, no matter how complex for me, was for each of them very simple. It was either his to handle or it was someone else's. And if it was someone else's the others had no interest; nor did one man want anyone else involved if it was his. Would they, could they, really become deeply involved with complex issues that cut across the lines of each one's responsibility? Could these individuals help me perform the complex integrative process of management? And, more importantly, would each one be able to take criticism and suggestions and ideas from the others on problems which each considered to be within his own responsibility? If anything was apparent to me about the group it was their lack of commitment to the entire Organizational Development program we had mounted some months before.[2] Each per-

2. A multi-action development program called "Action for Organizational Development" (ACORD). A major part of the program was the extensive use of laboratory training and behavioral scientist consultants provided under a contract with NTL.

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son in the group fiercely defended his own piece of the program, even at the expense of the others. Could they gain commitment to the whole from such a meeting as this?

I also wondered about the data that my good friend Chuck Ferguson had collected from the group. He had maintained that we needed a method of "deep sensing" within this group to discover the subsurface feelings that might be different from those on the surface. Some of these men had come to me privately, saying, "Do you really want him to dredge into the depths of all our feelings about one another and about you? Isn't it being disloyal for us to tell him of our problems and of our feelings for you? Does it serve any purpose for these problems to be brought out into the open and exposed? In fact, is he not *creating* problems for us when he digs as deeply as he has done into the problems we have as a group together?" And, of course, while assuring them they would not be disloyal to talk honestly and that these were things that we wanted to get out onto the table, I had my secret doubts about whether this were really the way to develop an organization. Now I had the sinking feeling that these two days could really end up in "group destruction" rather than in "group growth."

These were some of the feelings and questions that went 'round and 'round within me as we were finishing our lunch. And yet I knew that, according to the Theory at least, it would come out all right in the end, and something good would be the result.

Finally, the lunch ended and we filed into the conference room away from telephones and papers to confront the evidence that Chuck Ferguson and Charlie Seashore had gathered about us. We were ready to start our first session of "Organizational Development" or "Team Building."

THE GROUP HAS THE DATA

In accord with the design for the meeting, the two behavioral scientists interviewed all the persons who reported directly to me in order to get data that we would use in our off-site conference together. Interviews were conducted informally and in a friendly atmosphere, but they probed very deeply into each person's relationships and feelings for each of the others in

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the group and with me. Searching questions were asked. What are the real problems of getting the job done? What problems do each of the members cause you in getting your job done? What are the problems that the boss has caused in the group? What are the personal problems, the personality problems, and the real life business problems that are destructive to the group? What are the deep interpersonal feelings? Is there confrontation? How are differences handled in the group when they come up? Is there conflict? Are you interested in participating in others' areas of responsibility? Is there any feedback to members who get out of line or who have problems? Is there a spirit of help and coaching within the group? Is there a spirit of trust and caring in the group? What are the group norms; what will the group tolerate? And there were many, many other questions as well.

When the meeting started, Chuck put all of us in a large circle—a common shape within T Groups—and talked to us about the agenda and the procedures for the next two days. He said that he would present the data that he had developed about each of us, then each person would have a chance to comment or to talk about them, and finally others would be asked to join the discussion. Since the data were to be presented anonymously, we could start the process of seeing ourselves without creating embarrassment and animosity. This would give us the first opportunity for coaching and feedback, we were told. In this way the group would have an opportunity to work, for the very first time, on problems within the group in a non-threatening atmosphere.

Chuck explained that we would work upon the real issues, such as how we might form the new "Executive Group," how we might make policy, and so on, as well as dealing with the specific issues identified in the data. He assured us that in all cases he and Charlie Seashore would be there to help us to work through the data that we now had about ourselves and one another. He told us that he would stop us occasionally to talk to us about Organizational Development, to ask us to look at ourselves and what we were doing to one another or what we were doing as a group, or what we were not doing as a group.

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Dr. Ferguson had coded the data by number so that the various kinds of data that were similar were given the same number. One number would represent one kind of data gathered from numerous sources (persons), and another number would represent another kind of data, and so on. Thus, if more than one of us had a problem in common with others, that problem would have a common number for us all. In a group of ten there might be 20 common items—things that everyone felt about some of the others—and several individual items about various persons which no one else had felt.

THE BOSS IS THE HANG-UP

The consultant put each of our names on a large board and around each one he accumulated the numbers that related to the problems others had said that they had with that particular person. I remember seeing names going up with five or six numbers encircling them, but I certainly was not prepared to see the large cluster of numbers that went up around my name! Mr. Ferguson explained what each number meant, and I can still remember some of the ones around my name. For example: "He doesn't delegate properly." "He gives the same assignment to two or three people." "He gives contradictory instructions to different people so that there are binds within the group." "He makes unilateral decisions relating to our responsibilities without first talking them over with us." "He takes action in our areas without telling us." "We are not generally informed about what's happening in the whole group." "We are kept ignorant about one another's activities." "He doesn't like confrontation and conflict." "He can't make tough (people) decisions." "We can't get in to see him." "He sees the wrong people." "He doesn't give us his attention when we do see him." "He has too many irons in the fire at one time." "He confuses us about priorities." "He is manipulative." And more. In each case that "He" was myself! I could feel my anger rising. My feelings were really hurt at this point because I still was not convinced that any of these things were actually true despite their perception by these now not-so-loyal "friends." Further, I rationalized that in their dredging for feelings and in trying to discover problems, probably these people had stretched their imaginations just to come up with something to talk about. In my first

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throes of resentment, I could hardly refrain from saying, "If I'm so bad, pack up and get out and I'll find others who not only can do the job but will be glad for the chance!"

But it was not all bad. Chuck drew two big symbolic climates on the board, one of sunshine and one of rain. And he wisely pointed out that the evidence on each of us was not totally rain nor totally sunshine. There was some of both for each of us.

OUR SELF-IMAGES

About this time, after the session had run for an hour or more, Chuck eased the situation with a lecture. This lecture was about "the perception of self-image" as opposed to how we might be seen by others. He explained how our own perceptions might actually have little to do with reality. For example, a person could feel as right and as righteous as he wished and have absolutely pure motives when he was doing something—starting a policy or making a decision or taking a stand. But it was also true that others might see his motives and acts in an entirely different light. Thus, what really mattered was not what he thought and felt but how he appeared to others.

We came to realize that a person need not admit that anything he was doing was necessarily wrong, but that it was the wise man who could understand the way he made other people feel. If the *reasons for* what a person was doing and the *way* he was doing it were both misunderstood by his staff, and if it could be revealed to him *why* they were being misunderstood, then it might be easier for him to face the problem and talk about it and work it through and learn how to avoid being misunderstood in the future. This understanding was especially helpful to all of us in dealing with our own "self-images." For example, it came out that one of the men in the group was very resentful of me because I had singled him out in a public meeting to give him credit for a new program. I had thought that I was doing him great honor and favor, and my motives were pure and generous. But he had felt that I was trying to say to the group that if the project turned out to be wrong or did not work or somehow failed, that it was his idea and, therefore, he would have to bear the blame. I was making him the scapegoat! And while I did not

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have to admit to any wrongdoing in dealing with him, because my motives were pure, I did have to admit to a better understanding of the way he felt after seeing it through his eyes. We both perceived that our mutual failure to talk about this at the time had permitted our relationship to fester for no real reason. This was the spirit in which Chuck led us into the discussion of the problems we would face in our relationships with one another.

GIVING AND RECEIVING FEEDBACK

After these kinds of discussions, we had a deeper understanding of what we could achieve. Chuck then asked me to go around the room and tell each person how I felt about him and what my problems were with each one. The moment I dreaded had come! I was to confront, in public, each of these persons and reveal my feelings for them. This was to be my most difficult hour. But here again the consultants tried to give us an understanding of the deep difference between a cold, hard, objective, critical "appraisal" by the boss on the one hand and a legitimate (even if critical) "feedback" that is given in a climate of trust and warmth and caring, on the other. We discussed the obligations which were imposed upon all who opted into such a group; specifically, we were reminded of the obligation of "caring" for other group members. Members who "cared" had obligations both individually and collectively to help the others to understand how they "came through" and "were seen," how they were "felt" and "perceived," how they "looked," and how their actions and conduct and attitudes were helpful or were hurtful in their communications. Each had an obligation to give and to receive feedback, and to give coaching to the others.

Since Chuck had also interviewed me prior to the meeting, I knew that he had my candid observations on each of the individuals. All of them were my friends but, nevertheless, all of them had a few human weaknesses in their relationships among one another and in their relationships to me. I knew that I had revealed these in my data. I also knew that I had never liked or felt easy with such confrontation. I found it very difficult to express my feelings and my thoughts about each of my men. But I had the choice of giving them honest data about themselves or doing half a job, sliding off the is-

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sues as easily as possible despite what I had already told Dr. Ferguson.

As I went through the difficult task of discussing with each one of them the way he came across to me, there was not so much hurt as I had expected; strangely enough, there was no anger but genuine curiosity and interest. There was a great deal of group support, disagreement, and participation in what I was saying about each person. The discussions were animated in a give-and-take way, and my data were then often related to those which Chuck had collected from each subordinate. Caring and sharing became an exciting new game.

WORKING THE DATA

After we had gone around the room like this for a while, we decided to come back to those problems which related to me. We worked on them one by one.

For example, where one had said I did not delegate, I denied it by saying, "I am the best delegator in the Department. You all have authority. You have responsibilities in your area. And it is up to you to get them done." And then the anonymity would disappear because the person who had put this item on the list would come in hard to justify his stand. And so with illustration of time and place and circumstance he would prove when I had not delegated properly or how I would fall back after I had given them authority, or how I had made a decision unknown to them or how, before evidence had come in, I had changed their decision, and so on. This kind of confrontation only started the conversation. Chuck would not let any of us off so easily. He probed deeply. How did my action make them feel? How did they see me? What were my motives? How did this affect the group's work together? This and many more questions that he asked would give me the opportunity to reply, "Yes, but you don't realize the pressure I am under from the White House . . . or from the Congress . . . or from the Secretary. . . ." And the whole complexity of relationships, the pressures upon me, and explanations for my seemingly erratic behavior would come out. From such explanations and probings came understanding and a sense of sharing that had never before existed in the group.

After they had worked with me for awhile, someone else would say, "Well, I would like to talk about [such and such]

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a problem around my name because I really am not this way, either." Here again the anonymity would be dropped, because the person who had put up that item would say, "Now Mr. X, don't you remember when you did that? Don't you remember when we had this kind of problem with you in your shop? Don't you remember how you wouldn't give us the funds to get the job done? Don't you recall how you changed policies while we were in midstream and then we had to scrap all the efforts we had made to that date?" And then the general discussion would start—'round and 'round—with new appreciation for people, new insights into the problems the others faced, and a new understanding of the interlocking relationships of all the functions.

There were many job-related problems that were put on top of the table for discussion for the first time, as well as many personal relationship problems. Why do you act this way? Why don't you like me? Why do you mistrust me? What do I do that annoys you so? How can I gain your confidence? Why are you so rigid? And the amazing thing to me was that the group members were actually eagerly working on their own problems without getting angry—almost urging us, "Get on to mine. I would like to talk about the cluster around my name; and while I don't really believe it, if it's true let's talk about it and I'll try to do something about it." I could see the group, hour by hour, literally growing in trust, growing in solidity, growing in caring. They were somehow involved here with one another as they had never been involved before. In the old meetings they were just individuals attending a not too interesting discussion of another person's function. But here they were a real group facing a world of problems together.

The first night we worked until very late. No one really wanted to stop. We decided that we would come back early the next day and go on with the process which in reality had just started.

A TEAM SPIRIT IS BORN

The next day's activity was interspersed with lectures and with other techniques to make the group grow in trust and in confidence, in its ability to give and receive feedback, and in its confidence to deal with confrontation and conflict. For example, we would pair off in twos or threes to discuss the inter-

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personal problems we faced as they appeared on the board. We would then come back and tell the others about our findings and what we thought we could do to overcome these problems. The whole group would then be brought into the discussion, and the group members would talk about these things together. We talked about how we could work better as a group, how we could make group decisions, how we could share the problems that were coming to me, and how each member in the group could broaden his interest beyond his own specialty and responsibility so that he could accept a share in the whole group's problem. We discussed how the group could rid itself of its own individual parochialism and start a process of enlarging its interest and responsibility by working together as an extension of me. There was confrontation and conflict in the group and this was handled. There was feedback and caring, disagreements and frustrations, and these were handled. Personal animosities were probed and discussed and often settled, or at least understood. There was also creativity, and risk, and in the end there was a real sense of commitment to the principles which I at one time had thought that I might achieve more quickly by directive or more easily by manipulation.

I also realized that I had not fooled them about the real me. The group had had the data all along. But due to the climate of the group—its norms—we had not been able to be open with one another; we had not been able to face confrontation, and so the group could not share the data with me earlier. It would have hurt me too much at the time. It would have asked them to risk too much at the time. As "tough minded" as we thought our own management to have been, we soon learned that it had not been tough enough to deal with real conflict, deep personal feelings, or confrontation. Instead of this kind of confrontation's causing my leadership to dissipate, I saw a new excitement born of involvement emerging within the group. There could be no question of their total commitment to me as their leader and to the concept of the "Executive Group" which we had been discussing. Out of this meeting we all saw the phenomenon of a new group come into being

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before our very eyes! We were a united group—trusting and caring and sharing as never before.

These were a tough, exhausting, exciting, and fulfilling two days! But we were a team at the end and felt that we had the start of a capability of functioning as an effective Executive Group.

ACTION ITEMS FOR THE BACK-HOME SITUATION

Before breaking up for the weekend, we decided on several courses of action.

We decided that we would meet every morning to talk about the issues of the day, to decide how we would deal with them, what our actions would be, how we would proceed, and who would have the responsibility for handling each problem. In these meetings everyone would have an opportunity for input and discussion before decisions were made. In this way problems were made the responsibility of the whole group, with the whole group's having knowledge and input and commitment to the decisions that were made.

We decided to continue having a behavioral scientist (Charles Seashore) meet with us occasionally in our regular staff meetings and other work sessions so that he could observe what was going on among us, and so that he could stop the group occasionally to let us observe our own process. Certainly we knew that we would need his expertise, at least for some time.

We decided that we would come back together again at some future date to have another off-site session to review our group health and our new-found spirit of trust and caring. We came to realize that the relationships between people need maintenance to keep them working smoothly and that it cannot be something done only occasionally. We came to realize that we were embarking on a new management style, a new method of handling every day's problems, which would require a great deal from each of us—a new toughness of mind but dispensed with a great deal of "heart." Therefore we would need a continuing process of growth and understanding if we were to succeed.

We determined that we would like to have Dr. Seashore do continuing research with members of the group and go deeper

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into our organization so that there would be a continuous sensing of how employees felt. By this we could have a better understanding of the attitudes of our members and of how people "down below" saw us and were reacting to us. Thus we would be able to take steps within the system to handle the problems.[3]

Several of the members of this group decided that they would like to take their own subordinate staff off-site for the same kind of Organizational Development meeting. This was courageous on their part because they had seen how difficult it had been for me, the boss; and when they went off-site with their staff they realized that they would assume "the boss" role. Yet they were willing to take the risks because of the obvious vitality of the process in bringing people together, in opening people up so that they could make contributions, in actually reducing conflict by facing it, and because of the commitment that results when people participate and become deeply involved in the management process.

We decided to explore the possibility of having other off-site Organizational Development conferences with other major areas of the Department of State for whom our group was responsible for service and with whom we interfaced. For example, we provided administrative support to all the Bureaus and Offices; and if we could take them off-site with us we might be able to learn how we looked to our clients, how they felt about us, and what, if any, the problems might be in working together.

We discussed how we could be helpful to one another in the future in the way we worked together in the organization. For example, what were the coaching opportunities we had; how could each one help the other see himself and understand how he was coming through? How could we give feedback in the future that would not hurt but would be helpful and reinforcing? We determined that we would try to receive

3. Mr. Crockett resigned from the Department of State on January 31, 1960, and the ACORD program was soon discontinued by his successor. The reasons for his action were varied but included cost, style of management, failure of the Secretary to be personally involved, and so on. The discontinuance of the program should not be interpreted as the result of an evaluative judgment of its efficacy.

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such feedback without defensiveness. We agreed that we would not "put off" all of our process discussions for some future get-together but that we would feed this kind of information into our regular meetings so that we could deal with it on the spot since the data were there for all to see. In other words, we agreed that the group must police and reinforce and maintain the group and its members if what we had started to learn at this meeting would indeed be continued within the group. We agreed that if I did something they did not like or understand the others would bring it up for discussion.

The first attempt ever made in the State Department of bringing together a manager and his own staff to talk about their individual and group problems had come to an end. It accomplished many of the positive hopes that we had had for it. It had not gone aground. We had not risked so much as I had feared in those doubt-filled moments just before the meeting started. In other words, I believe that all of us felt that it was a worthwhile, constructive two days.

WHAT WERE THE RESULTS?

A story such as this requires a sequel—some description of what happened after the group went back to work in its real life situation. Certainly it would be erroneous to say that there were no continuing problems, because there were. The process did not guarantee an end to problems. All the old animosities were not forgotten. The process did not promise that, either. Conflicts and disagreements were still with us. But in the weeks and months that followed, the group showed a highly increased capability for getting issues out into the open, of surfacing the hidden problems, and in exposing personal animosities so that we could deal with them—in short, an increased capability to work together as a group.

It did break down the fragmentation that had previously existed. The process of welding ourselves into a total integrated management team was started. As a result, I believe there came to be a great deal more understanding of points of view, understanding of the total issues, understanding of the total problems and programs, and a greater commitment on the part of everyone to the total goals.

Also, the process did move downward in the organiza-

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tion and horizontally, to include other parts of the State Department. As proposed in our meetings, some of the members did take their own staffs off-site for similar meetings with similar positive results. The Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs at this time used this same technique of going off-site with his staff to better the management and decision-making process in his bureau. The same kind of program was planned for the Latin American Bureau and other areas. Our group did meet together in a similar off-site meeting with our client organizations and gained insights into how we were creating many of our own problems.

CONCLUSION

The lesson that was most impressive to us all was that the so-called Theory Y style of management—management by participation—is neither soft-headed nor "easy." It is much easier to sit in the big office and issue directives. It is much easier to avoid confrontation by issuing orders. It is easier to avoid personal involvement and conflict by smoothing over the surface. Theory Y management is not for the executive who likes surface serenity and obsequiousness. Theory Y management is for those managers who are willing to take the gut punishment of a truly tough-minded approach to management. It is for those who believe that conflict can be handled best by confronting it openly and for those who understand that real commitment of their people can be secured only by their continuing participation in making plans and setting objectives.

Organizational Development is not a panacea but a style—a tough-minded management style—and it works!

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